

UNCLE DAVE GAVE US BOASTING RIGHTS

By J. B. Leftwich

Writers' Corner

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In the decade when the last century had just passed its teen years, most of the residents in my childhood community had never owned a radio, seen an airplane except for a speck in the sky or owned an automobile.

Our information came from the Nashville Banner, which arrived one day late via rural delivery or by word of mouth, a system that could spread news rapidly among the farmers and their families.

But we knew of Uncle Dave Macon, who in our minds was radio's number one star.

There was a rumor that persisted in this sprawling neighborhood that Uncle Dave was planning a concert in the Rock Springs community of Putnam County, but most of us boys discarded it as just another wild story. It turned out to be fact, not fiction. Uncle Dave did show up at the schoolhouse and most of us managed to find a dime, the price of admission.

For weeks thereafter, we bragged about seeing and hearing in person Uncle Dave.

I remember him, sitting on the school's stage, tuning his banjo while we gaped. The boldest of our group asked questions about the Grand Ole Opry and the people he knew such as George D. Hay, the solemn old judge.

Luke Denny wanted to know about the Fruit Jar Drinkers. Silas Manier was curious about DeFord Bailey, who made a harmonica sound like a locomotive. Dan Young wanted to touch Uncle Dave's banjo.

Uncle Dave answered questions, seeming to enjoy the attention. For years to come, we boated of our "acquaintance" with Uncle Dave Macon, making our brief encounter sound like a lifetime friendship.

All of this came to mind after reading a newspaper story recently about "Uncle Dave Macon Days" when the Macon clan gathered and brought with them a family tree listing nearly 30,000 names, all tracing back to Gideon Macon who came to this country from France.

As I read the story, I reflected on my brief interval with Uncle Dave and recalled later experiences with widely known personalities whom I encountered as a newspaper reporter or as a teacher. Branch Rickey, former owner of the St. Louis Cardinals and an uncle of one of my students at Castle Heights, comes to mind. He earned a place in baseball lore by breaking the color barrier.

Since that encounter with Uncle Dave eight decades ago, I have climbed the Great Wall in China, kissed the Blarney Stone in Ireland and viewed the great art on the Sistine Chapel ceiling in Rome.

But being in the presence of and up close to Uncle Dave Macon may have been my hallmark experience.

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